

Going for the Green: Comptroller Teams Train for War at TOP DOLLAR

by Ms Lynnette Gonzales

This article details Air Force finance officers' unique experiences dealing with a variety of challenges during the Top Dollar competition held 7-12 December 2000 in Gulfport, Mississippi. Top Dollar is a physically and mentally demanding training exercise and competition that puts Air Force finance and contracting specialists in a bare-base environment simulated in a foreign country. It tests contingency-related and general military skills including handling pay disbursements, setting up allotments, purchasing goods and services from and negotiating contracts with foreign vendors, chemical warfare, small-arms marksmanship and the ability to survive and operate in a hostile environment.

The afternoon sun shone brightly between small, white clouds in a still, light blue sky. Birds sang from the trees in a nearby field. Suddenly explosions and gunfire shattered the calm. The sounds of screaming wounded filled the air. Heavy, red smoke enveloped everything it touched. A man with severe burns on his arms and face writhed in pain at the edge of the red haze. Two airmen rushed to his side. As one calmed the man down with soothing words, the other propped his head up with a folded jacket and started treating his wounds.



(Photo by SrA Sarah Hatfield)

Welcome to Marandua Air Base, Equatoria.

Everything went according to plan. After arriving at this fictitious, small South American air base built on the Combat Readiness Training Center in Gulfport MS, 13 teams of the Air Force's top comptrollers and contracting officers faced their first self-aid and buddy care scenario of Air Force Top Dollar 2000. The chaos caught them off guard, but they were prepared to handle it, and more.

Top Dollar is a physically and mentally demanding training exercise and competition that puts Air Force comptroller and contracting specialists in a bare-base environment simulated in a foreign country.

From 7-12 December, teams consisting of five finance specialists and two contingency contracting officers completed a barrage of scenarios that pushed them to the limits.

Following Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm in 1990 and 1991, finance personnel returned from the front lines faced with the realization that they needed better combat support. The challenges of supporting the warfighting commanders revealed some unexpected difficulties. To address these challenges, the Air Force created Top Dollar in 1992 to enhance the overall readiness of its comptroller members to respond to contingencies anywhere in the world.

After three years of competitions, Top Dollar expanded the five-person comptroller teams and added two contracting specialists. This addition recognized the need to integrate comptroller and contracting into one deployed unit equipped to handle any real-world contingencies. Both specialties agreed that for each division to do its job during a deployment, each needed to understand the other's issues and problems. The competitions following this decision incorporated more scenarios that required finance and contracting to work closely together.



SSgt Mike Martin, ACC team member from Ellsworth AFB SD, helps MSgt Alan Hull put on his gas mask during a Top Dollar Scenario. (Photo by SSgt Alex Lloyd)

[Team] AMC had a great saying: First in, last out. That's what it's all about, said Lt Col Tony Kitt, Top Dollar 2000 deputy commander. The importance of resource management, which includes contracting and finance, Top Dollar brings to light, and it lets the rest of the Air Force know that importance.

Today, MAJCOMs throughout the world conduct their own base-level Top Dollar competitions to determine the best of the best. The winners of these command competitions then compete at the Air Force-wide Top Dollar held every two years and planned by one of the commands. This year, Air Force Space Command was charged with setting up the event.

During Air Force Top Dollar 2000, combat and warfighting scenarios continued almost non-stop for five days. They covered numerous types of situations that finance and contracting specialists could encounter in a real deployment, including handling pay disbursements, setting up allotments, purchasing goods and services from and negotiating contracts with foreign vendors, managing a contingency budget, and ensuring tax exclusions and gratuities were processed.

All of the scenarios were based on real-life situations that have happened in the [finance and contracting] career fields over the past 10 years, said Col Brad Busch, Top Dollar 2000 commander.

In addition to completing over 250 timed scenarios that tested their ability to perform their jobs under stressful conditions that change with every hour, competitors were also tested in several military skills: self-aid and buddy care, chemical warfare, small-arms marksmanship, information security and physical fitness. They treated burns, leg and arm fractures, sucking chest wounds, eye punctures, and fatal head injuries; fired 50 rounds from 9mm handguns at targets 15 meters away; and conquered 15 obstacles in the confidence course such as belly buster, weave, yellow hopper, Tarzan, and tough nut.

Since Top Dollar is designed to challenge the competitors under bare-base conditions, most of the scenarios focus on situations that are unique to deployments. During a deployment, most decisions are criti-



TSgt Mark Aman, AETC team member from Vance AFB OK, treats a screaming airman's burns during the first Top Dollar self-aid and buddy care scenario. (Photo by SSgt Alex Lloyd)

cal. Comptrollers suddenly arrive in the middle of a jungle, a desert, a swamp, sometimes following a natural disaster, and must deal directly with the base commander. They need to adapt quickly to the lack of equipment and resources and learn what they must do to support the base's temporary mission. The base's staff can't provide much for them within the first few days of their arrival, so they're left to their own faculties to decide how to acquire the commander's daily requirements, set up an office, separate the duties and other necessary tasks.

They're not going into a base that is already set up where they can just walk into a nice, beautiful office building that they can operate from. There aren't people in place that they're going to augment. They are the team, and there's no one between them and the commander, Kitt said.

Working closely with contracting becomes a larger factor. Daily purchases require a faster turnaround. Although the rules and regulations that govern these tasks are relaxed, the specialists still have some statutory requirements to fulfill, in addition to satisfying the deployed mission.

In one of the first Top Dollar warfighting scenarios, competition staff separated the team members from their bags. They immediately had to report to the base commander to give him an in-brief on how much money was available. Following the briefing, the commander gave them a list of requirements with instructions to acquire everything as soon as possible. Without their bags, the finance specialists didn't have their checks, so the contracting officers couldn't conduct any business. When the scenario continued the next day with another list of requirements, the specialists realized that the first day's requirements took most of the money. It demonstrated the importance of the divisions working together to complete the commander's tasks.

According to Senior Master Sergeant Thomas J. Dunkleman, Top Dollar director of operations, the competition is as close to the deployed environment as comptrollers and contracting officers can get without deploying. The conditions in Mississippi mirrored those typical of a deployment. Ninety-one team members worked and slept in small tents with little room for anything else but their equipment and themselves. The on-site shower had only a small amount of hot, running water, which ran out early in the morning. The freezing water helped jolt most team members awake in time for breakfast. Unpredictable southern Mississippi weather forced members to discard the bulky jackets of the morning for sweaty, black T-shirts in the afternoon. When the simulated terrorist attacks increased and the air base went on alert, the T-shirts became soaked under the weight of chemical warfare gear.

Although Top Dollar is a competition, it's also a training exercise. Most of the staff and participants agree that all levels of the competition provide invaluable training the teams couldn't get anywhere else.

It would take them six months in the real world to get all the scenarios we gave to them in four days, Busch said. We tried to give them everything that they could possibly face. Every situation that's happened to every-



USAF team members and AFMC team members fire at their targets while wearing gas masks during the Top Dollar small-arms marksmanship competition. (Photo by SSgt Alex Lloyd)



(Front to back) SrA Travis Martin, A1C Brock Wortman, and MSgt Joe Pascua, DFAS team members from Ford Island HI, crawl under barbed wire as M-16 bullets fly overhead during the "belly crawl" obstacle of the Top Dollar confidence course. (Photo by SrA Sarah Hatfield)



SrA Aimee Zick, USAFE team member from Spangdahlem AB GM, assists a customer during a Top Dollar scenario. (Photo by SSgt Alex Lloyd)



MSgt Joe Sanfilippo and TSgt Joe Janus, AFSPC team members from Malmstrom AFB MT, explain Air Force regulations to a customer during a Top Dollar scenario. (Photo by SSgt Alex Lloyd)

body that's deployed over the last 10 years is in these scenarios. If they could be reasonably successful in these four days, then they ought to feel very confident that they can be very successful if they did this for real.

Staff Sergeant Jackie Dent, AMC team member from Charleston AFB SC, agreed. It was good training, she said. It gives you that added confidence that when you do actually deploy, you'll be able to do your job.

The Air Force-wide Top Dollar is an evaluation of training. Prior to this competition, MAJCOMs have trained their teams for months. The base-level competitions continue the training and provide extensive feedback. When the teams arrive for the Air Force Top Dollar, they're prepared to contend for the title of champion.

All of them are winners, said The Honorable Robert F. Hale, Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Financial Management and Comptroller. It's not just that they won their command competitions, although that's very important. It's because they've gotten better at doing what is our most important mission, and that is providing support to warfighters in a time of war.

The teams competed for seven awards: esprit de corps; general military skills; warfighting skills; best comptroller crew; best contracting crew; Top Dollar champion runner-up; and Top Dollar champion. After five days of intense competition, comptrollers and contracting officers from Wright-Patterson AFB OH, representing AFMC, were crowned the overall Air Force Top Dollar champion. They excelled in all aspects of deployment and proved superior in warfighting and general military skills. In addition to being the champion, AFMC captured the warfighting skills award, best comptroller crew, and best contracting crew.

The warfighting skills award recognizes the team that proves they could best support the commander with a variety of contracting- and comptroller-related skills, including how well a team activated and responded to the tasking orders, whether the tools needed to perform the mission arrived on time, and whether everything acquired was billed. The best crew awards recognize the members of a particular team who scored the highest on their division's contingency-related scenarios.



1Lt Trent Tripple, AFSOC team member from Hurlburt Field FL, tries to locate information for a customer during a Top Dollar scenario. (Photo by SSgt Alex Lloyd)

According to 1Lt Karl Falk, AFMC finance specialist, the ability to work together as a team was key. We had to get to know each other and their jobs, Falk said. When we worked on a scenario that [involved] both contractors and finance, we let each other know, so we could get ahead of the game.

Contracting and finance specialists from Bolling AFB, Washington, DC, representing 11th Wing, secured the runner-up position and esprit de corps award. They were outstanding in pre-deployment and activation aspects, as well as demonstrated exceptional warfighting and general military skills.

Whether you're in a competition or a real-world contingency, it's important to keep a positive attitude and always remember you can get the job done, said 2Lt Jamie Smith, 11th team member. We are all more prepared after having trained and competed in Top Dollar.

In addition to this distinguished award, Top Dollar staff members voted that 11th Wing showed the best teamwork, enthusiasm and positive attitude through all the adversity thrown their way.

There's no letter 'I' in the word team, said Lt Gen Roger DeKok, Vice Commander, AFSPC. I'd like to think of team as being 'Together Everyone Accomplishes More' because fighting and winning America's war is a team process. And that's why we compete here at Top Dollar, and that's why they've been here the entire week. It enables us to be winners because, as General Douglas MacArthur once said, 'Second best in our profession, the profession of arms, is not good enough.'

Representing AETC, the Vance AFB OK, team won the general military skills award. They exhibited the greatest proficiency in a variety of generic combat capabilities that are required of all armed forces, including the ability to survive and operate in a chemical warfare environment.

Before Top Dollar, I really had no idea how to do any of this, said A1C JayPee Magbitang, AETC contracting officer. Overall, it's trained me how to deal with real-world events while deployed.

Competing with these three winning teams were Andersen AFB GU for PACAF; Charleston AFB SC for AMC; Ellsworth AFB SD for ACC; Ford Island HI for DFAS; Hurlburt Field FL for AFSOC; Malmstrom AFB MT for AFSPC; March ARB CA for AFRC; McGhee Tyson ANGB TN for ANG; Spangdahlem AB GM for USAFE; and US Air Force Academy CO.

About the Author



Lynnette Gonzales is a public affairs specialist, Headquarters Air Force Space Command, Peterson AFB CO. She participated in Air Force Top Dollar 2000 as a member of the public affairs team. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree in English/communication arts in 1996 and her Master of Arts degree in communication studies in 1999 from St. Mary's University, San Antonio TX. Air Force Space Command is her first assignment.